



3 | IT IS ALWAYS THE WOMAN WHO IS RAPED*

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Rape is an aggressive act against women as woman. The rapist is educated to his behavior by his society, and rape is the extreme manifestation of approved activities in which one segment of society dominates another. Rape is a ritual of power.

There are at least two ways of knowing. One is intellectual and the other is experiential. With which voice shall I speak to you? After rape there is a terrible silence. Then, if one is fortunate, one begins to learn to speak again. Why is the silence so terrible and so profound? What is the meaning of the crime that has been acted out? Why are its effects so dire?

Rape is the most common of the violent crimes. As the incidence of rape increases and we focus our attention on understanding the rapist—learning almost nothing of the victims—we continue the social patterns that perpetuate the crime.

Literature, art, and myth are full of images of rapes that are approved, even canonized. We distinguish the crime on the street from "The Rape of the Sabine Women," yet the painting by Poussin is informed by the same values that produce the street crime. Rape is the assault of a man on a woman, but it is also the symbolic enactment of social and cultural attitudes. On one level, perhaps unconscious, it is a gross and extreme form of social regulation by which woman is brutally stripped of her humanity and confronted with her definition as a nonperson, a function.

These attitudes are not peculiar to the rapist. The rapist is not an eccentric but an extremist acting out the being and nonbeing scenario that is basic to American society. In this scenario, the rapist uses power to

Psichico/Stockmarket, Los Angeles

*Published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* 133:4 (April 1976), pp. 405-08.

confront the egalitarian aspect of sexuality—community. That the act that physically and symbolically indicates communion should be so often distorted into combat is not ironic but tragic, undermining essential relationships. Rape asserts only combat, brutalizing the communal aspect of sexuality, destroying meaning, relationship, and person, creating a universe of emptiness and ontological terror. There is no distinction between the male social intent and the private female response. A woman who is raped understands her condition with metaphysical clarity.

Rape is mythically asserted, artistically glorified, historically condoned, and symbolically urged in the media and in advertising. Persephone is a classic example of the rape victim. Persephone has been promised by Zeus to Hades. Her primary definition is property. The earth opens, Hades carries her within, imprisoning her in hell; she is isolated. Her mother, Demeter, mourns her, leaves Olympus, and in her grief withholds spring. Neither Zeus nor Hades is condemned. Male power is glorified, while Demeter, condemned for withholding, is reluctantly placated. Persephone is returned; spring comes. However, Persephone, having eaten pomegranate seeds while in hell, must return to Hades every year. Thus Persephone is responsible for winter. The victim bears the burden and guilt of the crime that has been perpetrated against her.

We can translate this myth into contemporary experience. A man commits a crime against a woman. The authorities ask her, "Why were you walking alone? What were you wearing? What did you say? Are you a virgin? Did you pull down the shades?" Three basic attitudes of power are involved here: 1) to be weak is a crime deserving punishment; 2) the weak are accomplices in the crimes against them, and 3) the victim has committed the crime.

The stories of Persephone, Leda, and Europa are early mythic tales that teach rape as a learned cultural activity. The rights of men over women, the attitude underlying all cases of rape, were translated later into the *droit du seigneur*, the "giving" of the bride in marriage, the rites and rights of the marriage bed. These social customs reinforced the idea of woman as property, to be entered and used for man's purposes: woman as function.

A function is not a person. Rape is one manifestation of society's intent to depersonalize woman. It separates the woman from her humanity. Reduced instantly from person to object, property, flesh, vessel, the woman is immediately separated from anyone or anything that can comfort her. The basic experience of rape is isolation. Humanity depends on community, and the effect of rape is to destroy simultaneously the sense of community and the sense of person. Demeter and Persephone are separated because there is no comfort Demeter can give. Persephone is alone and empty. After I was raped, I knew that women were vessels, shells that could be emptied, flesh and bone frames without centers or substances. Women were moons shining only with reflected light, dead planets.

Because women's assertion of self conflicts with social and cultural patterns and with role and biology, the loss of self after rape is grave. Rape is the instant proof of unalterable conditions, the erosion of years of work. Contemporary feminism has only begun to change this condition. The very unique interest of women in autobiography is a sign of the difficulty women have with identity. Where men always have asked, "What is the meaning of my life?" women are beginning to simply ask, "Do I have a life?" The effect of rape is the same whether the victim is a young girl, virgin, mother, or old woman. Rape is a crime against the person, not against the hymen.

My experience and that of the women I know tells me there is no treatment for rape other than community. Therapy or consciousness raising can be helpful as long as no "cure" for a "condition" or "disease" is implied. Rape is loss. Like death, it is best treated with a period of mourning and grief. We should develop social ceremonies for rape, rituals, that, like funerals and wakes, would allow the mourners to recover the spirits that the rapist, like death, steals. The social community is the appropriate center for the restoration of spirit, but the rape victim is usually shamed into silence and/or self-imposed isolation.

In some ways, rape is never erased. Years later, even the word "rape" or the shadow of a familiar face can cause unexplained pain. The raped woman often cannot bear to be touched. Isolation is her condition. Touched, she knows she cannot feel; touched, she remains untouched. She is incarcerated in Hades. Her mother is outside and cannot hear her.

After I was raped, I had intercourse with my husband as a ritual gesture. (I had learned as a child to get back on my bike after falling, lest I never mount again.) Intercourse was easy. It didn't matter. I was an abandoned house. Vacated. Anyone or anything could enter.

Later I went through the ritual of talking to people. It always seemed as if I were talking through glass or under water. I could never tell my mother; she couldn't bear the pain. Others, it seemed to me, drew away. I could not bear to be alone, but in company I felt abandoned, estranged. For months I looked to my husband for comfort he could or would not give. A year later, we began a divorce.

I felt endangered everywhere. Every noise startled me. Every leaf was camouflage for an assassin. For months a friend of mine described searching the faces on the street as if to ask, "Are you the one?"

Revenge became an obsession. My husband was a party to this; vengeance would relieve his feeling of impotence. We spent days searching the streets in a mythic ritual. He was looking for power. I was looking for self. If a crime had been committed, then perhaps there had been a victim and a victim is a person; perhaps I would find myself.

Rape is usually the assault by the stranger, the unknown asserting his perceived socially, culturally, politically, and God-given rights. In earlier times rape was more frequently enacted by familiars. The woman who was shared, given, offered, dedicated was in effect raped; to be

entered without permission, invitation, or desire is to be raped. Today most rapes are forced entrance by a stranger. The stranger is anyone. Simply a hand emerging from the shadows. Being anyone, the rapist is everyone. He asserts that the woman does not belong to herself. She is there for his use, his pleasure. She is nothing in herself.

The rapist acts for the society, concretizing certain ideas through his behavior. He is often marginally integrated into the society, and rape is the way he affiliates himself, if not through the act, then through the attitudes. Through rape he asserts power and possession in a common, violent, and spontaneous action. By choosing to assert himself against woman and her body, he—like church, state, schools, advertisers, and the media—is simply asserting certain rights and prerogatives over woman, using her for his own purposes. He is translating cultural thoughts into action.

The rapist is any man against any woman. Some form of anonymity is essential. He acts against the woman who happens to walk down the street, happens to be stranded, happens to be alone. It is an act not against someone but against anyone. Chance is an essential element. It reinforces the nonperson status of the victim, who is attacked at the moment of her nonbeing, in the shadows, alone, in silence, nameless; the rapist forces the identity of nonperson indelibly upon her. Whoever she had previously assumed herself to be, after the rape she is nothing: a body, a thing.

Yet rape is an assault on one's most private being. At her core, woman has a deep biological sense of herself, created through the cycles of blood and ovulation, through the pattern of puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, lactation, and menopause. This identity is enhanced by the cultural and symbolic values that the woman's body represents. It is this essence that is also violated: what she is and what she means. Finally, rape is a crime that gives the criminal pleasure. Not only is the victim possessed as by a demon, but she hears the demon laughing. She is used against herself. The groan of pleasure makes her feel despicable. Even before she is accused by police, parents, physicians, interrogators, she experiences herself as complicitor. Self-hate reinforces her personlessness.

Perhaps for these reasons, there are almost no stories of rape written by women. Leda is assaulted by a "feathered glory." A magnificent bull kidnaps Europa. Daphnè, pursued by Apollo, becomes a laurel, but Apollo is not deformed. Woman is one of the expected spoils of war. Cassandra is not the only one who speaks and cannot be heard; there have been millions.

Because rape is an act of power that male society will not undermine, the woman is defiled. Perhaps less consistently than at other times, the victim is isolated or isolates herself; she enters a psychic quarantine as if she were contaminated, diseased, scarred. Although today women do not automatically lose their social and economic value through rape, they are



Los Angeles Times

devalued through accusations of seduction. The woman is suspect while the man is protected. Society asserts he is ill, marginal, or falsely accused. Men protect his rights and worry that the accusation may be false or the evidence contrived. The rapist is protected because he is themselves. The issue is always power. Rape, like the immaculate conception, becomes an act without an actor—the immaculate defilement.

The nonperson status of women is maintained in various ways, all of which seem to focus on sexuality. Symbolically, woman is the door, the opening, the entrance that must be sealed, protected. In one sense, according to Octavio Paz, woman is the essential violated one; she is the wound, the entered, *La Malinche*, *La Chingada*.¹ Her condition is one of violation, and it is against identification with such openness that man arms and armors himself. When man himself is entered and violated he is, according to Jean Genet, used as a woman, womanized, degraded.

Yet society simultaneously asserts that woman is the not-yet-entered, the innocent. The virgin is the unknown. To have intercourse is to know and be known. Sexuality is therefore knowledge, and woman is often insulated from this knowledge. That is part of the pattern of power and powerlessness, of being and nonbeing. To be without knowledge is to be nothing. For we are what we know. Woman at her best (as virgin) is thus nothing. Traditional heroines or women of power are grandmothers beyond sexuality, like Golda Meir, or virgins, like Mary, Joan of Arc, Elizabeth the Virgin Queen. The combined image of power and knowledge

(sexuality) is terrifying: ogress, witch, Medusa, Clytemnestra, Medea—something to be destroyed.

The rapist acts against the societal injunction to protect the innocence of woman. He acts against the protection of woman, he denies the fortress of the private house. In so doing, he acts on the myth that for woman one error is fatal. Men, like the prodigal son, are capable of change, growth, learning. Women, for whom definition is finite, are confined within a single fall. Therefore the rapist has absolute power; he can destroy identity with a single act.

The raped young woman goes from nonbeing to Nonbeing—to not being at all. Rape is the act by which woman is known without knowing anything herself, the means by which knowledge and therefore presence is bypassed and nonbeing (innocence), which was tentative or temporary, becomes permanent. Raped, the woman becomes known, manifest, without gaining the identity that comes from knowledge. The only knowledge she gains is the knowledge of her lack of self.

With the exception of a few remarkable and brave women writers, including Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir, Anaïs Nin, Kate Millet, and Colette, contemporary and historic literature (which reflects and creates social values and attitudes) asserts the nonbeing of women. From D. H. Lawrence's *Plumed Serpent* and *The Man Who Died*, to Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*, and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, nonbeing is the definitive condition of woman. And rape, which the film critic Arthur Knight recognizes as a "film cliché," is the act that confirms this nonbeing.

The literary, mythic, and historic attitudes toward rape are still with us. The charge against Joan Little for the murder of the rapist jailer who assaulted her in 1975 is the classic case of the victim accused of the crime. It is as if simple defenselessness, isolation of woman in itself, invites attack. The circle is complete. Men isolate women and then accuse that isolation. Rape is socially seen as response rather than provocation—it is the desperate male response to a powerlessness that is confirmed for him by the specter of female identity. Similarly, when [in 1975] Inez Garcia acted as a person against her attacker, she was the one charged. Worse than the image of an attacked woman is an image of a woman counterattacking. Here, the contradiction of nonbeing creates panic.

In a society such as ours, where the fantasy of power is a constant stimulus and Superman, John Wayne, James Bond, and Kissinger are cultural heroes, while powerlessness and alienation are the reality, it is inevitable that rape occurs frequently. Males denied power in their daily lives find means to act as if they had it. Women are the obvious victims because male society still defines them as powerless, functional nonpersons. Providing men with the feeling of power has been considered to be one of woman's duties.

In 1968 I was raped at gunpoint. Later, lying naked on the floor, I could only whisper over and over again, "One doesn't treat people like

this." I had had only a momentary glimpse of the rapist, a stranger. From my brief description, a police artist drew a face identical to a photo I later identified in police records. This man, who was on parole, had been incarcerated for rape. His parole officer called him for questioning but concluded on the basis of an alibi that he had been too far from the scene of the crime.

The first fictional account I wrote of the rape (in an unpublished novel titled "Flying With a Rock") was couched in fantasy. I described the rape of a madwoman. I was still maddened by the assault and could only develop a character who had lost all sense of herself. Four years later I wrote a more accurate version, which describes a woman both overpowered and divested of her power.² Her last words are "I cannot." She is emptied out. I decided to make this public in order to break some of the silence and isolation which reinforces the personlessness of women. The private voice in the public sphere confirms our common experience through which we begin to assert ourselves. Unlike my character, now, I can.

From

SKIN / SHADOWS / SILENCE
A LOVE LETTER
IN THE FORM OF A NOVEL*

It is afternoon. You've heard this story before. This is the story I will tell twice and then again. It does not empty easily. This story has left a scar and the scar needs to be cut out. This story will be told again.

It is afternoon. I am alone. In an office. It is afternoon. I am alone. In an office. It is afternoon. I am alone.

There is a knock at the door. Or the sound of the door opening in the outer office. Or a knock and the sound of a door opening in the outer office this afternoon. I am alone. Thinking of things one thinks when one is alone in the afternoon. Almost a daydream. Allowed to think. Why should I be startled by a knock at my door or the sound of another door opening. Why should I hear the door or even interrupt my thoughts which are so pleasant this quiet afternoon. All the work is done.

Why bother to turn my head when I hear the floor creak? My thoughts are so pleasant, nothing can interrupt them. This is my time to muse. A rare afternoon alone. All the work is done.

Probably it is not a knock at the door that I hear and do not respond to. Probably it is the sound of a door opening quietly and of soft footprints across the floor. Or maybe it is the sound of a knock, a tentative tap to see if I am in. But it is a quiet afternoon and all the work is done and I am in to no one but myself, so I

do not answer the door. Probably there is no sound. It is not that I refuse to be interrupted but that my dreams are so intense that I hear nothing, not the initial knock on the outer door (if indeed there was a knock—probably there was no knock), nor the sound of the lock turning, nor the cautious feet across the floor, nor the cautious turning of the lock to my inner office and the stealthy opening of the door, nor the hand raised against me. Nothing. It is afternoon and I hear nothing, suspect nothing, till the gun is pressed against my head and the hand muzzles my mouth.

"Say nothing," he whispers.

It is a gun which is against my head. There is a man holding it. I cannot see him. But I do not think I know him. He ties an unclean and wrinkled handkerchief across my mouth. I close my eyes because I am afraid to know him. Simultaneously I keep them open in order to see this man. But I think I can see nothing.

"Take your clothes off," he says. Everything he says is in a strained and I assume disguised voice. Perhaps he is someone I know. Which is more awful—an anonymous assault by a stranger or by a friend?

My hands are shaking and he is laughing. I am struggling to obey. My feet are shaking also.

I can only see his feet. I have told you before about his scuffed black shoes which look like those with steel linings in the toes. They are laced with frayed black laces. His socks are white. Dirty white. His feet are wide. I suspect his legs are hairy and that the hairs are damp.

It is afternoon. A quiet afternoon. No one is about.

No one is knocking at the door. "Take off your clothes," he says. My body is shaking. The dress peels from me like skin, a heap of feathers disordered, plucked live from the skin, a mound of fresh leather in a corner. And the animal is still alive! And the deer stretches denuded flanks, twitching. I can see the blood run across the hooves.

I am naked. He is wearing clothes. I do not wish to see his legs hairy at the ankle bone. I cannot bear to see his clothes against my skin. I am naked. He is fully clothed.

I remember nothing. I will remember nothing. I tell you this without hearing my own voice. I tell you this again and again so I will never remember it. I remember how naked I am next to his clothed legs in order to forget everything.

Handprints on my back. Indelible markings. In later mirrors it seems my back grows away from his hands. An announcement in reversal. In recoil.

An invasion. A tree opening to fire. And a black hollow from which no twig can emerge again. Perhaps it is a gun penetrating me and orgasm will be a round of bullets. Pain is a relief. I cherish it as a distraction from knowing. I am an enemy country. Destroy me with fire. But there is no distraction. The cloth rubs against my legs. There is a gun resting on my shoulder. I do not forget that death is the voyeur at this encounter.

Turning. Turning. The flesh of the spitted deer crackles against the fire. I

want to reach for a knife to carve myself into morsels, to divide into portions, to carve a slit downwards from my navel to my spine.

There is a circle of steel against my ear.

I have told this before. It is afternoon, a quiet afternoon, and the taste of my own meat smeared on unknown flesh is in my mouth. I choke upon it. It is afternoon. I do not know what is thrust in my mouth. What banquet is this? What severed leg? What joint? What goat, deer, bone? I wish blood were dripping down my throat now. How long can I hold his sperm in my mouth without swallowing?

It is afternoon. I have told you this before. It is a quiet afternoon. I do not hear the sound of someone knocking at my door.

I try to say, "Come in." I would like someone to help me from the floor. I need a pillow under my head. Wrap me in a blanket. Turn the lights out.

It is early evening. It is night. It is tomorrow. I would like someone to help me up from the floor. I cannot say, "Come in," to the knock on the door. I cannot yell for help. I need to be wrapped in a blanket. I need a pillow under my head. And a nightdress. And a cover of white cloth.

Everything is quiet. My body is numb. I feel nothing. My body is numb. It is early evening.

There is a knock on the door. I cannot hear the knock at the door. I cannot say, "Come in." I need . . .

There is a knock at the door. I cannot say . . . I . . .

There is a knock . . . I can not . . . I . . .

I can not . . .